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Abstract

The eponymous hero of Sam Selvon's Moses Ascending (1975), an east Indian from Trinidad, buys a tenement house in Shepherd's Bush, West London. He also acquires Bob, a white Man Friday 'from somewhere in the Midlands, a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black Man'. Moses tries unsuccessfully to convert Bob from the evils of alcohol. 'I decided to teach him the Bible when I could make the time.' The account of Moses's trials with Bob typifies Selvon's writings, witty, pointed and good-humoured, giving a Caribbean twist to a familiar theme.

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Selvon was born in 1923 in South Trinidad, and educated in the semi-rural town of San Fernando. His father, a dry-goods merchant, was a first-generation East Indian immigrant to Trinidad, and his mother was Anglo-Scottish. His education ended with high school - his parents could not afford more - and he showed no ambition to take up a life in one of the professions. It was during long hours as a wireless operator in the Royal Navy in the Second World War that he turned seriously to writing. When demobbed, he became sub-editor of the *Trinidad Guardian Weekly*, one of the few writing outlets on the island.

The post-war years were a time of extraordinary literary activity in the Caribbean, with many who would later gain international reputations exploring their talents. These included George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Kamau (then Edward) Brathwaite. Wilson Harris and V. S. Naipual. Selvon's editorial work helped put him in touch with some of this activity, and his short stories began to appear in *Bim*, a seminal West Indian 'little magazine' and on the BBC.

In 1950 Selvon was one of the wave of Caribbean immigrants coming to England in search of fame and 'streets paved with gold'. He found neither, and there followed a hungry period, living in an immigrant hostel, then in a basement flat in Notting Hill, West London. This was to prove a formative period, turning a writer with yearnings to write romantic accounts of Trinidad (an early influence was Richard Jeffreys), into a sharp observer of the vagaries of immigrant life. In 1952 he published *A Brighter Sun*, and excellent reviews encouraged him to become a full-time writer.

A Brighter Sun is set in Trinidad, and he continued to write well about his home island. But he will be remembered first as the chronicler of

black immigrant city life, the subject of *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), its sequels, *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983), and a range of brilliant short stories. The best known of these is perhaps 'Brackley and the Bed', a tale which often featured in his public readings. Brackley, an easy-going Tobagan, is pursued to England by the teriffying Teena, who sets about reforming him and his tiny bed-sitting room. Teena takes over Brackley's bed and, reduced to a blanket on the floor, he is driven in desperation for sleep to marry Teena. But after the marriage ceremony Teena breaks into Brackley's fantasies of slumber by announcing she has now invited 'Auntie' to England to live with them. And 'she can sleep with me until we find another place'.

The story can be read at many levels, from the undermining of the sexual stereotypes of the West Indian male, to a parable about the immigrant's lack of roots. But the story's genius lies in its wit, its brilliant timing, and Selvon's miraculous transcription of the Caribbean idiom into written English. He starts not from formal European models, but from the strategies of the Caribbean calypso, the tall story told in rum-shop or on the verandah, and what Selvon himself calls the 'ballad'. His anecdotal style is Trinidadian, yet it remains accessible to readers across the varying creoles of the Caribbean, and, equally, to non-West-Indians.

Selvon's humour at first worked against his critical reputation. Although one of the most widely read and anthologised writers of the Anglophone Caribbean, he was sometimes dismissed as a lightweight entertainer. Yet *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) was a pioneer in its use throughout of Caribbean creole, and his success in using the idiom stimulated the linguistic liberation of Caribbean and other non-British writing from the bonds of 'standard English'. His importance has been increasingly recognised. With Horace Ové he wrote the script for the first British West Indian film, *Pressure* (1975). Despite moving to Calgary, Alberta, in 1978, he received numerous literary honours and awards, including doctorates from the universities of the West Indies and Sussex. He was much sought after on the international conference and lecture circuits.

There was an element of Selvon himself in the Moses of his London books, wandering with the immigrant tribes in the wilderness of Bayswater and Marble Arch. Yet there is also an element of self-parody. Selvon was the most gentle, self effacing of men, hardly a Moses. The pressures of late success would have been hard to cope with, had he not been protected by many friends world-wide. To the end he remained extraordinarily unaffacted by fame, a warm and sensitive personality whose art and persona formed a seamless whole. It is fitting that, after a life of exile, he should have come home in the end to Trinidad.